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Mystery of Chin spy case: How did he get any secrets?

By Tom Diaz
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The spy trial of retired CIA translator Larry Wu-tai Chin may prove to be the most intriguing in a string of cases filed in recent weeks against past and present employees of U.S. intelligence agencies.

The big question hanging over Mr. Chin's case is how a mid-level translator in a not very secret part of the CIA could have had access to sensitive material, much less shipped it off to a hostile power, for more than a quarter century without being detected.

One theory is that Mr. Chin's access to sensitive material, and thus the potential harm that he may have done, resulted not from his day-to-work, but from special assignments given him as a sort of linguistic pinch-hitter.

Mr. Chin, 63, pleaded not guilty yesterday in Alexandria's federal district court to charges that he spied for China — for more than 30 years.

FBI agents told the court in earlier affidavits and testimony that Mr. Chin began spying for the PRC in 1952, while he worked for the U.S. Consulate in Hong Kong, interrogating Chinese prisoners of war. They said Mr. Chin kept spying when he began working for the CIA later in the same year, and even continued after he retired from the agency in 1981.

Several anonymous law enforcement officials also reportedly told the New York Times last week that Mr. Chin provided China with "many of the CIA's top-secret reports on the Far East written over the last 20 years."

But the court papers that accuse Mr. Chin also raise questions about the government's case that will be resolved, if ever, only by the trial now scheduled for Jan. 22.

For example, there is some doubt about just how much sensitive information Mr. Chin would have had access to during his career.

"I am very skeptical of the allegations that he had access to the 'keys to the kingdom' and all sorts of sensitive [information]," George A. Carver, a former high-ranking CIA official said yesterday.

"It's serious anytime you have a staff officer with 30 years service [accused of spying]," he said. "But I would like to see the Chin case kept in perspective."

Mr. Carver, now a senior fellow at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, was deputy for national intelligence to two directors of the CIA and worked for a substantial part of his career in the Far East or on issues related to the region.

Papers filed by the FBI say Mr. Chin worked for the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, a branch of the CIA, and accuse him of giving China classified documents "from the aforementioned FBIS (CIA) files."

But, by the very nature of their work, FBIS employees routinely deal with little classified material. It is one of the few arms of the CIA that openly and regularly provides unclassified material to the general public.

"It's a monitoring service that translates foreign radio broadcasts, newspapers, and magazines," a CIA spokeswoman said yesterday.

"Basically, what FBIS works on is stuff that is put out in clear text on the air waves," Mr. Carver said.

The translations of foreign news that FBIS produces — eight volumes Monday through Friday, each covering a different region of the world — are distributed free to many U.S. government officials. Anyone else can subscribe to the service through the Commerce Department for a fee of $250 for the first volume and $80 for each additional volume.

FBIS does have a "small analysis section," according to the CIA spokeswoman. And it also has an "auxiliary branch," the Joint Publications Research Service, that is "called on to do lengthy articles . . . things that do not appear in the eight daily volumes," she said.

But, even so, Mr. Carver said "relatively little of great sensitivity" would pass routinely through the hands of a FBIS employee.

"If [Mr. Chin] had access to ultra-sensitive material, it was because he was pulled off of his regular work."

Some observers have suggested that Mr. Chin was often taken off routine work to translate highly sensitive documents. If that were so, he could have been privy to the most sensitive of intelligence documents — those that reveal the sources of information.

But Mr. Carver said that during his career he had "never heard of" Mr. Chin.

"As a reasonably senior officer in Far Eastern affairs for a long period of time, I would have thought that his name would have come up on my radar screen" he said. "Knowing how the system worked then, I would be surprised if he were regularly given access to sensitive material."

Meanwhile yesterday, the Justice Department asked a U.S. magistrate not to free the wife of accused spy Jonathan Jay Pollard. In a 23-page filing, prosecutors asked U.S. Magistrate Patrick Attridge to rule at a hearing today that Anne Henderson-Pollard, 25, be kept in jail without bond to ensure that she not provide any classified documents to a foreign power.

Mrs. Henderson-Pollard was arrested two weeks ago, following the arrest of her husband. She was charged with possession of classified material.

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